THE

MARLBOROUGH GARLAND.

A

REAL ANECDOTE

FROM

COMMON LIFE.

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A REAL ANECDOTE FROM COMMON LIFE.

SOME years ago there lived at the Castle at Marlborough TOM FRANKLIN a postillion, and a chambermaid who was known by the name of PRETTY POLLY. Tom was the smartest of all postboys, careful active tender of his horses, with all the natural civility of good nature and that sort of ingenuous countenance which engages the least indulgent at first sight. Polly was the prettiest of all chambermaids: the delicacy of her shape, the blooming modesty of her face, under the simplest and cleanest dress, with an inexpressible sweetness of voice and manner had often allured in vain the rich offers and passionate solicitations of the various sons of pleasure who frequent that great road. They were both orphans and come of reputable people.

Such a pair were soon drawn together by irresistible attraction: from the first moment of their acquaintance they began to render each other every little kind office, and to seek all occasions of being together. Tom was fifteen and Polly fourteen when they first met at the Castle. In three years their attachment had grown up to the love that amalgamates two beings of perfect affinity into one: Tom had neither pleasures nor pains but through the sensations of Polly, and Polly saw and heard only with the organs of Tom. Living in the same house and conversing without restraint they were so perfectly happy that they hardly suspected there was in reserve for them a still higher state of felicity, and the rare example of the pure love of the Platonics might have been found in the corner of a tap-room at an inn. In the same inn was

one of those mis-shapen creatures who from the habit of defending themselves against the illiberal contempt to which their deformity exposes them are generally more proud than others: he was employed to drive the mail cart from Marlborough to Chippenham, and when made angry, had been often heard to boast that no two men in England should rob him of his charge. This creature, who had strong passions, was also violently enamoured of Polly; and finding his addresses despised his mind had become possessed by all the grosser parts of jealous rage and desire of revenge.

In the beginning of August one evening about ten o'clock two ladies arrived at the Castle with their own carriage and horses. They had been detained on the road by the illness of their driver, and being obliged to proceed that night, Tom Franklin was sent to conduct them to Chippenham. On the Downs beyond Beckingham they were attacked by a footpad, who presenting a pistol to the boy's head obliged him to dismount, and proceeded to rifle the carriage; when Tom, seeing him wholly occupied about his booty, with equal courage and address seized the pistol which the highwayman had laid out of his hand; the villain instantly fired another pistol at him, and missing his aim took to his heels with all speed.

The joy of the ladies and their admiration of their gallant deliverer is easily conceived. On their safe arrival at Chippenham they dismissed him with a thousand expressions of gratitude and a present of ten guineas; and the younger of them who was very handsome remarked with much animation that it was a great pity he was not born a gentleman.

The poor boy who was remarkable for his sobriety, was induced by the caresses of the people of the house and the elevation of his spirits to drink more than his head could bear. Some postboys on their return furnished him with a horse as far as Beckingham, and there he drank again with them till he became quite intoxicated: amongst these the conversation had turned chiefly on the supposed bravery of little Humpback in case he should be attacked by the footpad. In this state Tom set out on foot from Beckingham to proceed to Marlborough, and had not gone half a mile before he met the

creature of whom they had been talking in his cart: the demon of drunkenness instantly suggested to him to try Humpback's boasted courage: the highwayman's pistol was presented, the letter-bag thrown out of the cart, and Humpback had driven off full gallop all in less than a minute. In stooping to take up the bag Tom fell down on the bank where it lay, and finding himself quite overpowered with the effects of liquor drew it under his head as a pillow and dropped into a sound sleep.

Miserable youth! to what scenes of horror wert thou destined to awake! Love joy and eighteen years of innocence all destroyed in a moment by one little error! Such are the dispensations of human society!

Humpback had alarmed the neighbourhood with an account of the robbery, which he said had been committed by four men armed; and having obtained assistance returned to the post-office at Marlborough without perceiving Tom Franklin. There it was judged expedient to begin the search by going back to the place where the robbery happened, and Tom was accordingly found in the situation already described. He had slept away his intoxication and wakened perfectly in his senses, but had no recollection of any thing that had happened after he left Beckingham.

As soon as the wretch found that it was his rival by whom he had been thus grievously insulted, the shame of his defeat was converted into malignant joy, and he instantly determined if possible to reach his life.

Plain honesty is the honour of the common people: Tom Franklin would sooner have cut off his right hand than have wronged any body of a farthing; what then was his dismay to find himself publicly and undeniably detected in a theft! his heart sunk within him, he attempted no defence, and when he was carried before the next justice of peace, where Humpback charged his evidence with many false circumstances, he who really remembered nothing that had passed received the accusation with an air of resigned dejection which to most of the people present seemed the consciousness of criminal intention.

Shame and the sense of guilt are too frequently mistaken for each other; indeed they are perhaps but rarely found together; for shame is most com-

monly the pain of an ingenuous mind on being falsely suspected of ill: the more the heart of this youth disdained the crime of which he appeared to be guilty, the more severe was his sense of shame; personally brave to temerity, he had no courage to support infamy, and not finding any resource against that, the thoughts of saving his life scarcely occurred.

Polly had been long anxiously expecting her Tom's return, and when one of his fellow postboys rode into the yard and with tears related the sad story she instantly sunk lifeless on the ground: as soon as her senses returned she insisted on going to him, and walked or rather ran near six miles in less than an hour; when she arrived, the mittimus had just been signed for committing him to Salisbury gaol: the moment she saw him she perceived no other object, the most modest and timid of her sex rushed through the crowd, and pressing him in her arms before all the people as he stood trembling and pale as his shirt, said "Oh Tom! what have you done!" Orders being given to proceed, the wretched pair walked forward hand in hand overwhelmed with the excess of their misfortune: yesterday the happiest and best and kindest of beings, to-day victims to guilt and infamy and despair! In running, her fine hair had fallen down from under her cap, and tears of which she was quite unconscious dropped without ceasing on her delicate bosom, then for the first time exposed by the disorder of her dress to common view. The youth's livid cheek and hollow fixed eye were marked with the wildness of distraction.

When they came to Salisbury she accompanied him into the prison, where they sat together till night on the ground without uttering a single word. The gaoler then told her she must not continue there, with which she submissively prepared to comply, the people observing as she went out that she must be an impudent hussey indeed to come there after a highwayman; but this and other gross ribaldry she did not even hear.

Much in the same manner they passed the nine days previous to the assizes, she taking in the day as much of his provision as was absolutely necessary to support life, and passing the night on a stone bench in a field

under the prison wall till the doors were opened in the morning. They conversed but little, and made no complaint.

When the trial came on she attended him into court: unfortunately robberies of the mail had of late been very frequent, so that this crime was noted by the judges going on circuit as one that was to be treated with extreme rigour. Humpback's evidence was clear and uniform, and the youth utterly depressed with his situation made little defence. The lies industriously spread by his enemy had already prejudiced the jury against him, and the silence of despair passed with them for sullen insensibility.

The fate of an obscure fellow accused of an ignoble crime raises but little interest. Compassion has its delicacies, and requires sympathies that exalt us in our own esteem. This story decorated with a few pathetic circumstances may perhaps excite a tear, but when the imagination is calm and the heart still, who is to take the part of a poor unfriended thief? A severe example was necessary to check an increasing evil, and no comparison can be made between the immense detriment a great commercial country may receive from the insecurity of epistolary communication and the life of a poor postillion. I say it unwillingly, but I think the tendency of a court of justice, even when composed of the better natured sort, is rather to condemn than to acquit; the former is the natural catastrophe of the tragedy, and the sorrow we feel, little as it frequently is, is still a subject of self-complacency. Unprovoked and at ease, we are ready to resent the imputation of cruelty as foreign to our nature; but I think we should be far better employed in examining how the human heart is lead by insensible degrees to the extremes of barbarity, and in keeping perpetual watch over that innate feeling, which tells us twenty times a-day that we are of more consequence to ourselves than the rest of the world put together are to us, than in idly endeavouring to renounce community of species with such of our fellow-creatures as we have perhaps ourselves aided to drive from human society. In this digression is contained the moral of my tale.

While the sentence was passing, which was to be hung in chains, Polly

was carried out of the court in convulsions: but this was her last act of weakness. Though mild and gentle in the extreme she had naturally a strong mind, and losing from this moment all consideration for herself, she devoted her whole soul to cheer and sustain her beloved; she attended him back to prison, endeavoured to animate his courage with the example of her own, and bade him trust in God, who knew the honesty of his heart, that they should assuredly soon meet again in heaven never more to part. She told the gaoler she was his wife, and insisted on remaining with him in the condemned hold, to which partly by her entreaties and partly by presenting him with five guineas saved out of her wages, destined, alas, for other purposes! she prevailed upon him to consent.

When the fatal day came, Polly neatly dressed attended him to the place of execution with a firm countenance and without shedding a tear. She again with great boldness encouraged him to die in full confidence that through the mercy of God they should soon be joined again for ever and ever; and when the handkerchief was drawn over his face his poor emaciated countenance seemed illuminated with a ray of hope.

This was the utmost effort of human force, and from this moment her brain began to turn. She went home and remained still till night, and then retired to her chamber. When all was quiet, she dressed herself in all the little ornaments which her lover had at different times given her, and taking a spade out of the garden in her hand returned six miles to the gallows; then looking up to the object of all her wishes hopes and desires, she thus addressed his inanimate corpse; O my only love! my sweet Tom! art thou then there? Is this our marriage? Is this our house?—Yes, yes, this shall be my only house! this shall be my grave! here will I lie that our bodies at the last day may be found together. These were the last coherent words she ever uttered.

Thus saying she began to dig the ground, and with incredible labour made a sort of trench large enough to receive her body; then she went and filled her apron with branches and herbs and flowers, and lying down in the

trench covered herself with these as well as she was able. By this time it was morning, and some labourers passing by, and thinking her dead, returned to the house to relate what they had seen. When the people came they found her wits quite gone; she was however still very gentle and tractable, and suffered herself to be led away without resistance. After this she seldom spoke, except frequently calling on her lover's name, and repeating something of a plaintive ballad which he had taught her and loved to hear her sing. She was soon afterwards sent to Bedlam, where two years ago she still existed in a state of incurable melancholy.

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